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A Psychologist Looks Thoreau in the Eye: Did He Meet Criteria for Asperger's Disorder?

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I was intrigued by Robert Thorson's recent article suggesting that Henry Thoreau had Asperger's disorder.[1] It is certainly a reasonable hypothesis, and Professor Thorson is not the first one to raise it. At least one organization devoted to autism spectrum disorders (the Autism Association of New England) has listed Henry as one of the famous and successful people in history who may have had it, and his name appears on numerous other lists of a similar nature.[2] The purpose is always the same: to use the positive qualities of well-known individuals to combat the stigma associated with the affliction and to provide encouragement and hope to people who have it.

Did Henry Thoreau have Asperger's disorder? Over the years, I have spent a great deal of time with Henry, so to speak, by immersing myself in his writings and what others have written about him; and as a clinical psychologist I have also encountered a number of people who have Asperger's disorder. However, despite my awareness that Thoreau's name is present on the lists mentioned above, I never seriously considered the possibility prior to reading Professor Thorson's article.

The core symptoms of the disorder fall into two broad clusters: Criterion A describes qualitative impairment in social interaction; Criterion B contains examples of restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities.[3] There are four classes of behavior described in Criterion A, and at least two of these must be present for this criterion to be met. The first one (Criterion A1) is marked impairment in the use of nonverbal behaviors to regulate social interaction. Such behaviors include eye contact, facial expression, and gestures.

I am not aware of any reports that Thoreau failed to make appropriate eye contact when he conversed with others. This particular characteristic is easily observed (difficult to miss, actually), and one would expect that if it were present it would have been mentioned by one or more of the numerous commentators who knew him during his lifetime. There is a description of his gaze by John Weiss, one of his college classmates: "How the prominent, gray-blue eyes seemed to rove down the path, just in advance of his feet, as his grave Indian stride carried him down to University Hall! . . . we remember him as looking very much like some Egyptian sculptures of faces, large-featured, but brooding, immobile, fixed in a mystic egotism. Yet his eyes were sometimes searching, as if he had dropped or expected to find, something."[4]

The intent downward gaze could be consistent with Asperger's, but it is more typical for people with the disorder to be described as staring off into space. Weiss's description is also consistent with a person who is simply lost in thought, a behavior that is not in itself an indication of any mental disorder. In any event, none of these behaviors is described as occurring during social interaction, so we cannot infer that they satisfy Criterion A1.

The second class of behaviors under Criterion A is failure to form peer relationships appropriate to developmental level. Children with Asperger's disorder often gravitate toward younger children, whose expectations regarding social behavior are not so stringent as those of peers; these children also tend to find it easier to relate to adults, who are often more tolerant of their eccentricities than are their peers. We know that as a schoolboy Henry routinely refused to join with peers, preferring to stand on the sidelines and watch. He was described as quiet and solemn, in stark contrast to his brother, John, who frequently laughed, joked, and entertained classmates with stories. There were a few occasions when Henry attempted to emulate his brother, but the results were described as "most improbable."[5] Aspergians typically desire social interaction and friendships with others, but because they lack the ability to regulate social interaction, their attempts to reach out often founder. As a result, many simply give up and choose to stand aloof. This scenario provides one reasonable way to account for Henry's early and sustained social aloofness. We see that he occasionally did try to entertain peers with stories, as his brother did, but that he lacked John's talent for it. We also know that, as an adult, Thoreau had a particular

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fondness and affinity for children. Edward Emerson recounted the time when his father was in Europe and Thoreau was staying with the Emerson family. He described Thoreau as "a free, friendly, youthful-seeming man, who wandered in from unknown woods or fields without knocking . . . passed by the elders' doors, but straightway sought out the children."[6]

George Hoar, a student at the school Henry ran with his brother, recalled that Henry joined in the children's games and took them for long walks in the woods to show them the best places to find berries, nuts, and rare flowers.[7] On the other hand, Thoreau clearly did develop relationships with peers in college (which he started at age sixteen) and afterward. Walter Harding points out that when he was away from campus on occasion, "he received warm, friendly letters from A. G. Peabody and Charles Wyatt Rice telling of extracurricular pyrotechnic experiments in the Davy Club and 'laughing gas' binges on the banks of the Charles, hardly the type of letter one would write to the cold, standoffish individual Weiss thought Thoreau to have been."[8]

Harding also points out that Henry was one of only five members of his class voted into the Institute of 1770, a private fraternity and debating society.[9] One might argue that a debating society provides a particularly good fit for a person with Asperger's disorder, because debating is a highly structured, rule-governed activity with clear, specific expectations, one in which there is a premium on ideas and logic, and in which the value of inflection, facial expression and other non-verbal behaviors is minimized. Yet he is known to have had quite a few other friends outside the confines of organizations such as the Institute of 1770, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Ellery Channing, and even Sam Staples among them. It seems that Henry may have met this criterion as a child but later did develop a number of developmentally appropriate relationships. This is not infrequently the case among individuals with Asperger's disorder. For one thing, through trial and error they eventually learn social skills with which most others seem to be born, and as adults they are better able to relate to peers than they were as children. For another, adulthood offers broadened horizons in the social world, and as a result they are better able to find people who can tolerate and even appreciate their eccentricities. It is worth noting that Channing was himself quite eccentric and Hawthorne, too, was not without social peculiarities, on occasion standing up a visitor to his home in favor of a walk or a boat ride with Thoreau.

The third class of behaviors under Criterion A is a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with others. Regarding this criterion, it is clear that Thoreau made strong and sustained efforts to share his writing with others and, through his writing, his ideas, interests and passions. One of his former students, George Keyes, had this to say: "We boys used to visit him on Saturday afternoons at his house by Walden and he would show us interesting things in the woods nearby . . . He was never stern or pedantic but natural and agreeable and friendly, but a person you would never feel inclined to fool with."[10] And consider this recollection by Louisa May Alcott: "[He] used to come smiling up to his neighbors, to announce that the bluebirds had arrived, with as much interest in the fact as other men take in messages by the Atlantic cable . . . He gravely informed us once, that frogs were much more confiding in the spring, than later in the season."[11] It seems clear that Thoreau did not meet this criterion for Asperger's disorder.

It is one thing to want to share one's interests and achievements with others; it is quite another to take an interest in their interests and achievements when they do not happen to be the same as one's own. This leads us to the fourth class of behavior under Criterion A, which is a lack of social or emotional reciprocity. This implies, among other things, a lack of empathy for the feelings of others—difficulty in taking the perspective of others and predicting how they will react to various events. Henry's refusal to join the games of his grammar school classmates might be thought of as an instance of impaired social reciprocity, and it resulted in his being seen as "stupid" and "unsympathetic" by a number of them. In retrospect, there is no doubt that "stupid" was misapplied; and in any case this has no relevance to the question of whether he might have had Asperger's disorder. However, the term "unsympathetic," if accurate, is quite relevant because it suggests a lack of emotional reciprocity.

Another example from his youth also suggests this. When he was accused of stealing a knife from a schoolmate, he said only, "I did not take it." He might have also told who actually did take it, for he later said he knew all along; and he might have added that he was in Newton with his father the day it was stolen, information that would have made the accuser much more ready to believe that he did not take it. An explanation, consistent with Asperger's disorder, for his failure to provide such information (which most people would have provided immediately) is that he responded only to the "surface structure" of the accusation and provided only the information that was being directly requested ("I did not take it") but failed to read between the lines and infer that (1) his accuser would be more likely to believe him if told that he was out of town, and (2) the victim of the theft might be eager to know who actually did take the knife, if not Henry.

On the other hand, there were times in his life when he did seem to correctly interpret the emotional needs of others and respond in an effective manner. In one instance, a boy on one of his frequent huckleberrying parties tripped and spilled every berry he had spent the afternoon collecting. He burst into tears and was inconsolable despite other children's offers to give him their berries. Henry knelt down, put an arm around the boy, and explained that nature had provided for little boys to stumble now and then so that berry seeds might be sown. The boy's tears turned to smiles at the thought of returning in a few years and seeing "a grand lot of bushes and berries" on that very spot.[12] On another occasion, Thoreau attended a dinner in honor of Edward Emerson's impending departure for Harvard College. Walter Harding tells us:

> Thoreau, realizing the mental turmoil young Edward was going through at this turning point in his life, took him aside and, with a serious face but a quiet, friendly tone of voice, reassured him that after all he would still be really close to home and that most likely after his college days he would return to his beloved Concord to live just as Thoreau himself had. Edward found the words of comfort a great relief.[13]

There was also the time, years earlier, in 1849, when Ellen Emerson (Edward's older sister) went to Staten Island to visit relatives. Perhaps recalling how homesick he was during his sojourn there as a tutor, Henry wrote her a letter (July 31, 1849) detailing the events back home and encouraging her to see the sun rise over the ocean before returning home. At the end of the letter, he surmised that Ellen might feel obligated to answer and did a rather skillful job of relieving her of this feeling while simultaneously letting her know that he would be pleased to receive "a sentence" from her "if . . . it should be perfectly easy, and pleasant to you."[14] Another interesting aspect of this letter

is Henry's statement, "I can guess pretty well what interests you, and what you think about."[15] If Thoreau had difficulty understanding or inferring the thoughts and feelings of others, he was evidently not aware of it!

Finally, there is Edward Emerson's defense against the "mighty indictment that [Henry] was not honest in his Walden experiment, for he did not live exclusively on his own meal and rice, but often accepted one of his mother's pies."[16] Emerson explains that Thoreau did this not because he was unable to fend for himself ("he could have lived uncomplainingly where an Esquimau would, on *tripe de roche* lichen and blubber"), but because he did not want to hurt his mother's feelings "and ungraciously thrust back on his loving mother her gift."[17] Based on the limited evidence available to us, it seems clear that as an adult Thoreau was not entirely lacking in social or emotional reciprocity, though he may have been below average in these areas. Whether or not he met this criterion in adulthood would depend on how far below the norm he was, and this can be a difficult determination even when the person is sitting in front of you and collateral information is available from family members. There is stronger evidence that he met this criterion as a child, learned to overcome it, and subsequently demonstrated empathic abilities as an adult.

Criterion B—encompassing restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities—is, like Criterion A, characterized by four classes of behavior, two of which must be present for the criterion to be met. The first is preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest. The interests must be abnormal either in intensity or focus. Behaviors that meet Criterion B1 must be distinguished from passions or preoccupations that may be uncommon but are not abnormal or pathological. For example, a New England Patriots fan who purchases season tickets, knows the team roster and the scores of all the games, and keeps track of injuries and trades would not necessarily meet this criterion unless these activities interfered with other important areas such as occupational, academic, or social functioning. Members of the Thoreau Society share a strong interest in, and passion for, Thoreau's writings, but most are able to balance Thoreau-related activities with their other responsibilities. Contrast this with the young autistic boy I met once who knew all there was to know about vacuum cleaners. His entire interaction with me consisted of eliciting information about any vacuum cleaners I owned and providing meticulous detail about how mine stacked up against others on the market.

Did Henry meet this criterion? Some of his contemporaries would have thought so. They saw him as lazy and selfish because he did not make money for himself and his family, as he might have done, "by attending to his business."[18] The large amount of time he spent reading, writing, and walking the countryside interfered with his doing what they considered proper work. These days, consideration is given to his writing, and perhaps his voracious reading, as interests that may have been abnormal in intensity or focus. But he did, in fact, balance these with other activities by which he earned money, such as working in the family's pencil factory, surveying, and even pitching manure out of a pigsty when the need arose. He also stopped reading and writing long enough to participate in melon parties and other activities.

Michael Sperber, in his recent publication *Henry David Thoreau: Cycles and Psyche,* seems to pathologize Thoreau's passion for writing by calling it *hypergraphia.*[19] This term

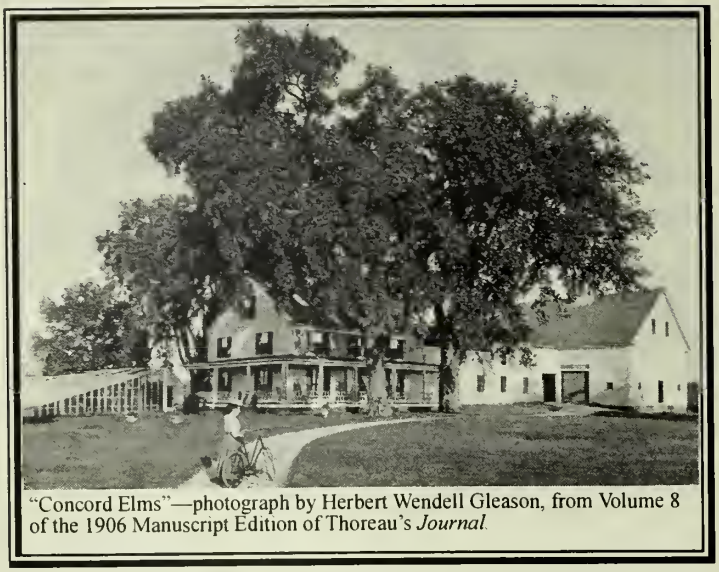
"Water-lily"—photograph by Herbert Wendell Gleason, from Volume 11 of the 1906 Manuscript Edition of Thoreau's *Journal.*

The best show of lilies is on the west side of the bay, in Cyrus Hosmer's meadow, above the willow-row . . . How satisfactory is the fragrance of this flower! It is the emblem of purity. It reminds me of a young country maiden. It is just so simple and unproved. Wholesome as the odor of the cow. It is not a highly refined odor, but merely a fresh youthful morning sweetness. It is merely the unalloyed sweetness of the earth and the water; a fair opportunity and field for life; like its petals, uncolored by any experience; a simple maiden on her way to school, her face surrounded by a white ruff. But how quickly it becomes the prey of insects!

***Journal*, August 5, 1858**

implies the presence of a compulsion to write, which causes considerable distress if the person cannot perform it or tries to resist it. As described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (commonly cited as the *DSM*), compulsions are repetitive behaviors, the goal of which is to reduce anxiety or distress, not to provide pleasure or gratification.[20] I have seen no convincing evidence that Henry felt compelled in this sense to write or that not writing resulted in significant distress. And his writing can only be seen to have interfered with other important activities if one assumes, as did some of his contemporaries, that he should have devoted a great deal more time to making money than he did. These very contemporaries, of course, were those whom he was trying to awaken with his chanticleer's cry in *Walden.* Thus, it does not appear that Henry met Criterion B1 any more than most Patriots fans or Thoreau Society members do today.

The second class of behaviors under Criterion B involves apparently inflexible adherence to specific, non-functional routines or rituals. An example of this kind of behavior is the need to eat only certain foods. This was true of one young man I encountered not long ago. His parents complained that "road trips are a nightmare," because the particular foods he felt he had to have were not easily obtained on the road and he refused to even consider trying other foods. Another Aspergian I met some years ago kept losing jobs because he insisted on doing assigned tasks in set ways that were often at odds with what his employer wanted. Other examples of Criterion B2 are hoarding



"Concord Elms"—photograph by Herbert Wendell Gleason, from Volume 8 of the 1906 Manuscript Edition of Thoreau's *Journal*.

things and wearing the same kind of clothing day after day, even in inappropriate contexts (for example, sweat pants and a sweat shirt at a funeral).

Comparable behaviors appear to be lacking in the life of Henry Thoreau. Thoreau was not picky about what he ate. When, on one occasion, he was asked what his favorite dish was he replied, "The nearest."[21] We also know that the people he worked for as a surveyor were pleased with his work, and his ability occasionally to secure other jobs as a day laborer seems to have been unimpaired. He did resign from his position as a public school teacher in Concord because of strict adherence to his principle of avoiding corporal punishment in teaching. Teaching in this manner would not qualify as a non-functional routine or ritual, however, but rather as a value that he held so strongly that he felt compelled to resign rather than violate it. And although Thoreau was certainly no slave to fashion, what little we know about his dress does not indicate that it was all that far from the norm. When he did depart from the standard, it was usually for a good reason. For instance, he preferred corduroy because it could be obtained at a fraction of the cost of other materials and lasted twice as long.[22] Indeed, one might argue that dressing according to the dictates of fashion comes closer to being a non-functional routine or ritual than did Henry's approach to dress, which was based on function and frugality. It is true that he did establish a consistent routine of reading or writing in the mornings and walking in the afternoons, but this, too, was functional for him and he did not adhere to it so rigidly that it stopped him from taking excursions and involving himself in other activities. All things considered, he does not appear to have met Criterion B2.

The third way in which Criterion B operates is through stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms, such as flapping one's hands or fingers. The function of these behaviors is often self-stimulation, as when a person wiggles his or her fingers above and to the side of the head and watches the movement out of the corner of the eye (more often seen in full-blown autism than in Asperger's disorder, however). These behaviors can also be a form of self-soothing. One young man I knew recalled how he unintentionally drove his parents to distraction by frequent, rapid slapping of his thigh. Another man I know has what appears to be a tic in his left eye. Unlike a tic, however, the behavior is voluntary and provides self-stimulation by briefly doubling the image of whatever object he is looking at and then putting them back together. This man also sometimes looks at a speck on his eyeglasses and moves his head in order to move the speck in a particular pattern. Both of these behaviors are rather subtle and may escape notice by others. If Thoreau had manifested any of the more blatant forms of motor behavior, such as flapping, one of the many commentators whose descriptions of his behavior survive to this day would surely have mentioned it. However, he may have manifested more subtle, undocumented forms of this class of behavior. As it stands today, we have no clear evidence that he met this criterion.

This brings us to the fourth class of behaviors under Criterion B, a persistent preoccupation with parts of objects. Thoreau was mechanically inclined, and as a result of his design modification, the performance of the family's plumbago grinding machine was significantly improved. He also came to the rescue of Ralph Waldo Emerson when something needed fixing around the Emerson house. There is no reason to think, however, that Thoreau was ever preoccupied with the parts of objects.

Although not part of the diagnostic criteria, one feature commonly associated with Asperger's disorder is clumsiness. Thoreau was certainly not physically clumsy. He was, in fact, so adept with his hands that his family considered apprenticing him to a carpenter before the decision was made to send him to Harvard College. He was also evidently quite capable of the well-coordinated whole-body movements required for ice skating. When Sophia Peabody Hawthorne observed him skating with her husband, Nathaniel, she described him as performing "dithyrambic dances and Bacchic leaps on the ice."[23]

Finally, we arrive at Criterion C. The behaviors that meet criteria A and B must cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. I suppose in this case "clinically" significant means that the impairment is severe enough that one might come to a mental health clinic to find out what is wrong. In any case, many people with Asperger's disorder are unable to support themselves because their behaviors prevent them from keeping jobs. Sometimes the offending behavior relates directly to the work, as when the person insists on doing the work in a particular manner, despite it being inconsistent with the employer's wishes; other times the trouble arises because of inappropriate social behavior on the job. As we have seen, however, Thoreau worked at many jobs, and his surveying, in particular, was often in demand because of its thoroughness. His highly systematic approach to just about everything, as well as his thoroughness, may have been Aspergian traits, but he seems to have found ways to make them work in his favor.

One might argue that Henry did not keep any of his jobs for very long (with the possible exception of his surveying), but this was by design and apparently not because he was unable to do so. Besides, the fact that his main occupation was as a writer—a "job" he held continuously for all of his adulthood—would counter this charge. And although he lived in the family home most of his life, he earned his keep. As for impairment in social functioning, we have seen that he had quite a number of friends and did enjoy a social life, including skating, berrying, melon parties, and other activities. He may have appeared socially impaired as a schoolboy, standing on the sidelines and watching while classmates played, but as an adult this does not seem to have been the case. He certainly socialized less than his contemporaries and once wrote that he found solitude to be more companionable than any companion, but he was not socially isolated, even during his sojourn at Walden, and he was usually able to get along with

others when it suited him.

So, after all this, what can we conclude about Thoreau and Asperger's disorder? We will almost certainly never know for sure. But after sifting through the available information, it seems that he probably did meet Criterion A as a child by virtue of his lack of appropriate peer relationships and his apparent impairment in social and emotional reciprocity. These were not so apparent when he was an adult, however, based on the evidence available to us today. He may have had them as a child but grew out of them, so to speak, by the time he reached adulthood. There is scant evidence that he displayed any of the behaviors that meet Criterion B; and he seems to have successfully managed the demands of grade school, college and adult life (albeit in his own unique way), which suggests that Criterion C was never met either.

This brings us to an interesting point. A person who clearly meets Criterion A and Criterion B would, strictly speaking, not qualify for the diagnosis of Asperger's disorder if they were able, despite their symptoms, to function both socially and occupationally. Thus, John Elder Robison—whose *Look Me in the Eye* documents the author's lifelong struggle with Asperger's—technically does not now meet Criterion C because he has a family and friends and has been very successful in not one but three businesses. Yet finding out that he had the disorder was a "revelation" and "a tremendous relief" to him, his successes in life notwithstanding.[24] This has been the case with virtually all of the adults I have known who did not realize they had Asperger's until they came to see me in my professional capacity as a psychologist. There is something deeply healing in learning that there is an explanation for the difficulties that have plagued you all your life, that they are not your fault, and that there are many others in the world with similar problems which mental health professionals recognize collectively as a distinct clinical entity.

My favorite part of *Look Me in the Eye* is when Robison asks, "So is there a cure?" The reply is, "It's not a disease. It doesn't need curing. It's just how you are."[25] My initial reaction to this was, "What?! Of course it's a disease, it's in the *DSM*, isn't it?" But after a little thought, I realized that various entities have come and gone from the *DSM* over the years—why not Asperger's as well? Decades ago, homosexuality was listed in the *DSM* as a mental illness. It has since been dropped and now, in the eyes of both mental health professionals and of a growing number of non-professionals as well, it is just the way some people are. For now, being able to diagnose Asperger's disorder is a very useful thing. It helps individuals who suffer from it understand and accept themselves and, just as important, it helps other people in their lives to understand and accept them, too. Ironically, at this point the diagnosis seems to actually *reduce* stigma rather than increase it. And when Asperger's is recognized early, interventions can be planned to minimize its impact from the beginning. Still, I can imagine a time ahead of us when the diagnosis will not be needed anymore, when the general population is more knowledgeable, more understanding, and more accepting, and someone with Aspergian traits will simply be thought of as marching to the beat of a different drummer.

Notes

[1] Robert M. Thorson, "Thoreau and Asperger's Syndrome?," *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 262 (Spring 2008): 9-10.

[2] See the Thoreau page by Greta Eckhardt on the Asperger's Association of New England website, at www.aane.org/asperger_resources/articles/miscellaneous/henry_david_thoreau_aspergers.html. See also (for example) the "Famous People Believed to Be Aspies" pages on the All Things Asperger's website, at www.allthingsaspergers.com/Famous%20People%20on%20the%20Spectrum.html.

[3] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed., text rev. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), 80-81.

[4] John Weiss, "Thoreau," *Christian Examiner* 79 (1865): 98.

[5] Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography* (New York: Dover Publications, 1982), 18.

[6] Edward Waldo Emerson, *Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1999), 1.

[7] Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, 87.

[8] Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, 40.

[9] Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, 41.

[10] George Keyes, recollections of Thoreau, in Edward Emerson research and biographical materials relating to Thoreau, Edward Waldo Emerson and Emerson Family Papers, Vault A45, Emerson Unit 3 (Box 1, Folder 9), William Munroe Special Collections, Concord Free Public Library, Concord, Massachusetts, quoted in Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, 194.

[11] Louisa May Alcott, "Merry's Monthly Chat with His Friends," *Merry's Museum* (March 1869), quoted in Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, 192.

[12] Moncure D. Conway, *Autobiography, Memories and Experiences of Moncure Daniel Conway* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 1: 148.

[13] Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, 453-454.

[14] Henry D. Thoreau, *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958), 246.

[15] Thoreau, *Correspondence*, 245.

[16] Edward Emerson, *Henry Thoreau as Remembered*, 25.

[17] Edward Emerson, *Henry Thoreau as Remembered*, 25.

[18] Edward Emerson, *Henry Thoreau as Remembered*, 5.

[19] Michael Sperber, *Henry David Thoreau: Cycles and Psyche* (Higganum, Conn.: Higganum Hill Books, 2004), 1, 40.

[20] *DSM*-IV-TR, 457.

[21] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau," *Atlantic Monthly* 9 (1862): 240.

[22] Thoreau, journal entry for May 8, 1857, *Journal IX: August 16, 1856-August 7, 1857*, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 359.

[23] Sophia Peabody Hawthorne, as quoted in Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau*, 139.

[24] John Elder Robison, *Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2007), 237-238.

[25] Robison, *Look Me in the Eye*, 236.

Walden by Haiku: A Review

June Beisch

Ian Marshall. *Walden by Haiku*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2009. 270p.

Ian Marshall does not find sermons in stone, as Shakespeare does, but finds haiku in Thoreau's *Walden*, and delivers three hundred of them in this beautiful new book from the University of Georgia Press. Although this is not the first book on *Walden*

Please submit items for the Fall *Bulletin*
to your editor before September 1
Leslie Perrin Wilson; lwilson@minlib.net

Although exceptions will occasionally be made for longer pieces, in general articles and reviews should be no longer than 1500 words. All submissions should conform to *The Chicago Manual of Style*. The Thoreau Edition texts (Princeton University Press) should be used as the standard for quotations from HDT's writings, when possible. Contributors need not be members of the Thoreau Society, but all non-members are heartily encouraged to join.

and haiku, it surprises us with a scholarly discussion of haiku properties (nature, simplicity, aloneness, and a sense of the impermanence of all things), giving the reader an informative and valuable lesson in haiku. The chief pleasure of the book, however, is in the close readings of *Walden* which take up much of the book and lure us back to Thoreau's pages with renewed vigor, refreshing Thoreau for us in a new way and revealing the hidden poetry within.

The contrast between Japanese haiku and the prose of *Walden* has a great deal to do with the use of metaphor, which is Thoreau's favorite trope but one which haiku eschews. Haiku uses images and looks at the thing itself in its natural setting. Then, too, the American ethos, of which Thoreau is a manifestation, is one of rugged individualism, whereas Asian haiku reflects love and compassion for community as well as nature. Perhaps the emphasis on aloneness ties the two together, but in haiku, aloneness is something we share with others.

In his introduction, Marshall presents the dilemmas and satisfactions of eliciting haiku from the prose of *Walden*. He writes: "The text of *Walden* . . . seems remarkably haiku-like in some regards, and so Thoreau's prose lends itself to haiku treatment. What features of the text seem haiku-like? In sum, the selection of images, often juxtaposed, where the physical images can carry a large freight of meaning and can convey resonance and depth" (xxviii). He demonstrates this through an ample selection of *Walden*-based haiku. The following sample is adapted from the chapter "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors":

evenings by my fireside
snow whirls wildly
without

my path through deep snow
oak leaves lodged in my tracks
melting them deeper

a half-filled cellar hole
a fringe of pines
former inhabitants

apple trees
planted and tended by slaves
their fruit wild and ciderish (61).

Each chapter of *Walden* is represented in haiku, accompanied by Marshall's observations and commentary.

An English and Environmental Studies professor at Penn State, Altoona, Ian Marshall believes that ecocritics can find in haiku a ready-made set of aesthetic principles that may be fruitfully applied to nature writing. Those principles include honoring solitude, simplicity, and humble, familiar objects, all of which can be found in *Walden*. But the better value of this book, in my opinion, lies in its offering a refreshing second look at a long-familiar text.

Perhaps this opportunity will spur even newer and more imaginative readings, as well. I can imagine taking the "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" chapter of *Walden* and working it into long lines of poetry:

I went to the woods because I wished
to live deliberately;
to front only the essential facts of life
and to see if I could not learn what it had to teach,
and not, when it came time to die,
discover that I had not lived.
I did not wish to live what was not
life; living is so dear; nor did I wish
to practice resignation.

Marshall maintains his focus on haiku, however.

But there are significant differences between haiku aesthetics and Thoreau's aesthetics. In *Walden*, Thoreau finds the miraculous in nature. Although Thoreau has been called "cranky and curmudgeonly," Marshall sees *Walden* as a "very loving and attentive book" (56). But is it really? I would call it a masterpiece of writing, full of insight about nature and human nature, but the tone is not always loving. Many sections of *Walden* are written in an edgy tone, one of exasperation at the pace of American life. Thoreau's writing lacks the serenity of a Bashō or other haiku master, although tranquility comes through now and again. His tone in *Walden* is one of reproach to a society where men lead lives of quiet desperation, while the tone of traditional haiku is more accepting of human nature. Moreover (as already noted), although suggestive, haiku does not rely on metaphor. The reader must work hard to eke out its meaning. *Walden*, on the other hand, is highly metaphorical.

"Butterfly on Joe-Pye-weed"—photograph by Herbert Wendell Gleason, from Volume 5 of the 1906 Manuscript Edition of Thoreau's *Journal*.

Eupatorium purpureum . . . We are willing this coarse plant should be called Joe Pye weed.

Journal, July 29, 1853

Marshall does, all in all, adequately acknowledge such divergences. In his commentary, he observes: "Thoreau's grounding in both his home place and Eastern philosophy might account for the bent of his prose in *Walden* that makes it seem amenable to an approach via haiku aesthetics. The Buddha too sat by the Ganges. Whether or not haiku qualifies as a Zen art, it certainly is imbued with Asian philosophy and spirit—and, to some degree at least, so too is *Walden*" (201). Thus, he provides the broad framework necessary to justify the couching of Thoreau's words in a form not always completely suited to them.

An Astronomer Reads Thoreau

Tom Calderwood

In 2007, I decided it was time that I read Thoreau's journal. I had long been a *Walden* and *Maine Woods* enthusiast, and was then working as a volunteer at the Henley Library of the Thoreau Institute. I started borrowing volumes of the 1906 edition of the journal from a friend, and soon discovered the following, written in December 1839:

> If you let a single ray of light through the shutter, it will go on diffusing itself with out limit till it enlighten the world, but the shadow that was never so wide at first as rapidly contracts till it comes to naught. The shadow of the moon when it passes nearest the sun, is lost in space ere it can reach our earth to eclipse it.[1]

Eclipses occur when the earth, moon, and sun are directly aligned. The orbit of the moon about the earth is not perfectly circular, nor is the orbit of the earth about the sun. Thus, the earth-moon and sun-moon distances are slightly different at each eclipse. The moon is smaller than the sun, and its shadow is cone-shaped, terminating at a point somewhere in space. Should the moon be "close" to the sun, relatively speaking, and far from the earth during an eclipse, the tip of the shadow cone will be above the surface of the earth. In this case, observers experience only an annular eclipse, and not a spectacular total eclipse. Thoreau understood this.

As I progressed through the journal, I found more references to astronomy. Astronomy has been my hobby since I was a kid, and I was delighted to find Henry taking an interest in things celestial. I began making note of his comments, building up a substantial list which I thought might prove valuable. Imagine my chagrin when I finally got to Volume Fourteen and found that there was an index! No matter—there were more things in Henry's heaven than were dreamed of in the index.

Astronomers, it should be noted, are interested in more than just stars and planets. A peek into the archives of *Astronomy Picture of the Day*—an excellent website—reveals entries for optics, light, atmospheric phenomena, and even clouds.[2] Henry's observations had the same breadth, and also extended to poetics and philosophy. A quick categorization of his notes includes aurorae, twilight, shadows, comets, meteors, telescopes, and, of course, stars. Not surprisingly, the moon is the celestial object he noted most, followed by Venus, and most commonly at dusk. He wrote on August 6, 1851:

> The light from the western sky is stronger still than that of the moon—and when I hold up my hand the west side is lighted while the side toward the moon is comparatively dark.— — — But now that I have put this dark wood (Hubbards's) between me and the west—I see the moonlight plainly on my paper— I am even startled by it— One star too, is it Venus?, I see in the west[.][3]

Thoreau was moved to research moonlight. In his journal entry for September 21, 1851, he referred to several of his sources:

> Burritt in his Geography of the Heavens say[s] "The quantity of light which we derive from the Moon when full, is at least 300 thousand times less than that of the Sun." This is Mons. Bouquer's inference as stated by Laplace. Prof. Leslie makes it 150000 times less, older astronomers less still.[4]

Robert Sattelmeyer has identified the edition of Elijah Hinsdale Burritt's *The Geography of the Heavens* which Thoreau may have consulted as that published in New York in 1850, noting that earlier editions were also available.[5]

Henry also had a keen eye for light. In the journal, he recorded purplish sunsets, green daytime skies, blue nighttime skies, pink snow, and blue shadows. He wrote on January 4, 1856, for example:

> A clear, cold day.
> P.M.—To Walden to examine the ice.
> I think it is only such a day as this, when the fields on all sides are well clad with snow, over which the sun shines brightly, that you observe blue shadows on the snow. I see a little of it to-day.[6]

On a suitably cold, clear day this winter, I went to Walden Pond to see if I could spot the blue shadows. In the mid-afternoon, I couldn't clearly make out blue shadows anywhere. Large shadows cast by tree trunks were possibly bluish, though one could argue the point. But as the sun approached the horizon, there were a multitude of blue shadows. They were most prevalent on the snow-covered ice. Each small hillock cast a shadow which was unmistakably blue. I had surely witnessed this phenomenon before, as has anyone who has stood on a frozen pond at sunset, but it had never registered.

That same evening, I looked at the sky to test Henry's further claim (September 9, 1851):

> The light of orion's belt seems to show traces of the blue day through which it came to us— The sky at least is lighter on that side than in the west even about the moon. Even by night the sky is blue & not black for we see through the veil of night into the distant atmosphere of day.[7]

To my astonishment, the sky around Orion appeared blue! Every time I look up at night, I now confirm this to myself. The blue sky is especially noticeable around the moon.

Henry made several observations of aurorae. The following were recorded on September 7, 1851, and January 28, 1858, respectively:

> The northern lights now as I descend from the Conantum house have become a crescent of light crowned with short shooting flames—or the shadows of flames. [F]or some times they are dark as well as white.[8]

> Coming through the village at 11 p.m., the sky is completely overcast, and the (perhaps thin) clouds are very distinctly pink or reddish, somewhat as if reflecting a distant fire, but this phenomenon is universal all round and overhead. I suspect there is a red aurora borealis behind.[9]

Elsewhere (in the journal entry for April 22, 1852), he described the northern lights metaphorically, as like "some grain sown broadcast in the sky."[10]

One sport of modern amateur astronomers is watching for spacecraft at dusk. In the early evening hours, when the sun has set on the surface of the earth but is still illuminating objects high in orbit, satellites such as the space station can be seen as they reflect the sun's rays. The family of Iridium communication satellites produce spectacular reflections, known as *Iridium flares*. On November 30, 1858, Henry saw a nineteenth-century version of such a flare:

> Just before the sun disappeared we saw, just in the edge of the horizon westward from Acton, maybe eight miles off, a brilliant fire or light, just like a star of the first magnitude or a house burning without smoke, and this, though so far and so brilliant, was undoubtedly only the sun reflected from some gilt weathercock there. So incredibly brilliant are all surfaces now. It was pure flame, larger than a house, precisely as if the planet Venus rested in the horizon's edge. Possibly the weathercock was nearer, but we concluded that it was not.[11]

Not a spacecraft, but a similar effect.

One of the most intriguing astronomical subjects in Thoreau's journal is Perez Blood, a farmer in north Concord who owned a telescope. Thoreau wrote of a visit to Blood in July of 1851:

> I have been tonight with Anthony Wright to look through Perez Bloods Telescope a 2nd time. A dozen of *his* Bloods neighbors were swept along in the stream of our curiosity. One who lived half a mile this side said that Blood had been down that way within a day or two with his terrestrial or day glass looking into the eastern horizon the hills of Billerica Burlington—and Woburn— I was amused to see what sort of respect this man with a telescope had obtained from his neighbors—something akin to that which savages award to civilized men—though in this case the interval between the parties was very slight. Mr Blood with his scull cap on his short figure—his north European figure made me think of Tycho Brahe—[12]

There are additional references to Blood and his telescope beyond the journal—in Thoreau's letters, Emerson's journal, Edward Jarvis's "Houses and People in Concord, 1810 to 1820,"[13] Bessie Keyes Hudson's manuscript paper "Century of Concord Homes,"[14] and in scholarly works such as Walter Harding's *The Days of Henry Thoreau*[15] and Laura Dassow Walls's *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science*.[16]

The details in the various accounts of Perez Blood are sketchy. Moreover, these accounts do not agree with each other in all respects. I am researching Blood further in the hope of telling his story more fully at some point. For instance, he is supposed to have gone to college, but Harvard, at least, has no record of him. Also, I wonder whether Blood had two different telescopes in 1847 and 1851, the years of Thoreau's recorded visits to him. Walter Harding characterizes Blood's telescope as homemade. Having myself built a telescope, I am skeptical that a homemade telescope would, in the nineteenth century, have required an outlay of $95.10—the reported cost of Blood's telescope.[17] Was the instrument perhaps made by Alvan Clark of Cambridge? Clark began to sell telescopes around 1850, and eventually became the premier telescope builder in the United States. Thoreau visited him in March 1854 and took along his newly-purchased spyglass.

"Bateman's Pond"—photograph by Herbert Wendell Gleason, from Volume 9 of the 1906 Manuscript Edition of Thoreau's *Journal*.

Clark pronounced the instrument to be of good quality. In his journal entry for that day—March 13—Henry roughly described what is known as the "star test,"[18] still used to evaluate telescopes today.

Perez Blood died in 1856, leaving no heirs. Thoreau and Emerson attended the auction on June 2, 1856, at which Blood's effects—including his telescope—were sold.[19] I would welcome information from anyone who can clarify the story of Blood and his instrument(s). You can reach me at tjc@cantordust.net.

Notes

[1] The text as quoted here is taken not from the 1906 edition, but rather from the Princeton Edition: Henry David Thoreau, *Journal. Volume 1: 1837-1844*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell, William L. Howarth, Robert Sattelmeyer, and Thomas Blanding (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 93.

[2] Accessible at http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/astropix.html.

[3] Thoreau, *Journal. Volume 3: 1848-1851*, ed. Robert Sattelmeyer, Mark R. Patterson, and William Rossi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 359.

[4] Thoreau, *Journal. Volume 4: 1851-1852*, ed. Leonard N. Neufeldt and Nancy Craig Simmons (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 88.

[5] Robert Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History, with Bibliographical Catalogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 143.

[6] Thoreau, *Journal VIII: November 1, 1855-August 15, 1856*, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 83.

[7] Thoreau, *Journal. Volume 4*, 64.

[8] Thoreau, *Journal. Volume 4*, 60.

[9] Thoreau, *Journal X: August 8, 1857-June 29, 1858* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 266.

[10] Thoreau, *Journal. Volume 4*, 484.

[11] Thoreau, *Journal XI: July 2, 1858-February 28, 1859* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 356.

[12] Thoreau, *Journal. Volume 3*, 289.

[13] Edward Jarvis, "Houses and People in Concord, 1810 to 1820" (typescript from original 1882 manuscript; with 1915 annotations by Adams Tolman), Spec. Coll. 974.44, Concord/Jarvis, William Munroe Special Collections, Concord Free Public Library, Concord, Massachusetts, 157-159.

[14] Bessie Keyes Hudson, "Century of Concord Homes" (manuscript), [1936], Vault A45, Hudson, Unit 3, William Munroe Special Collections, Concord Free Public Library, Concord, Massachusetts, 1-4.

[15] Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 291.

[16] Laura Dassow Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 44.

[17] Thoreau, *Journal VIII*, 362.

[18] Thoreau, *Journal. Volume 8: 1854*, ed. Sandra Harbert Petrulionis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 41.

[19] Thoreau, *Journal VIII*, 362.

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More Notes from Concord

Information provided by the Thoreau Society Office.

July 24, 2009

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Social Awareness: Thoreau and the Reform Movement

Highlights from the 68th Thoreau Society Annual Gathering, Concord, MA (July 9-12, 2009)

Left to Right: Tom Potter, Thoreau Society President; Nikita Pokrovsky, from Russia; Marjorie Harding, wife of the late Thoreau scholar Walter Harding; Albena Bakratcheva, Bulgaria

Left to Right: Tom Potter, TTS President; Bob Galvin, AKA "Jones Very"; Rich Kato, a Life Member of the TS

Left to Right: Susan Ramsey, violin; David Mallett, guitar; Michael Burd, bass

Three Generations Left to Right: Pam Mack with her daughter Elizabeth and mother, Lorna. Lorna Mack was awarded the 2009 Thoreau Society Distinguished Achievement Award for her years of service on the Princeton Edition of Thoreau's Writings

Dana S. Brigham Memorial Keynote Speaker, John Matteson

Richard Smith, as Henry D. Thoreau, read *A Plea for Captain John Brown*

Jonathan Fadiman accepting the 2009 Thoreau Society Distinguished Achievement Award for his service to the community at the Shop at Walden Pond since 1995

Thoreau Society members listen to *A Plea*

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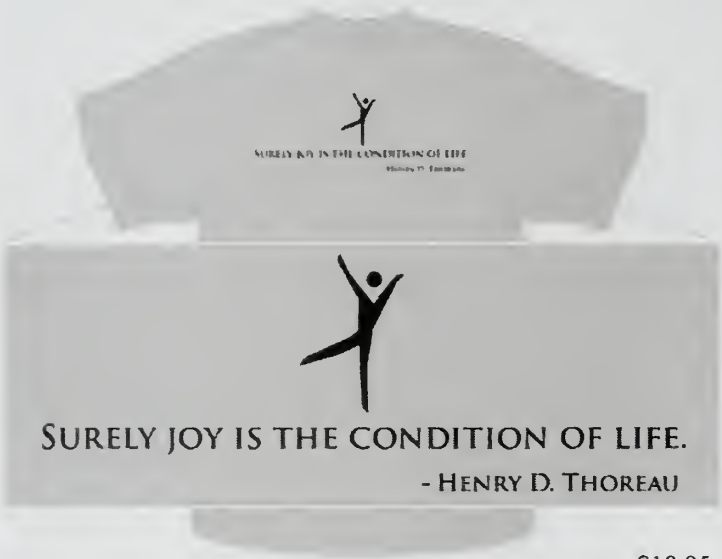

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Abstracts

Thoreau Society presentations at the annual conference of the American Literature Association, San Francisco, California, May 2008

Session 1: "Teaching Thoreau in the Twenty-First Century: A Round Table"

"Thoreau's *Walden* and Freshman Comp," Ryan Cordell

At the University of Virginia, our first-year composition courses are themed ("*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Teen Culture," "80s Pop Music," and so on). For students, themes give each class a common pool of knowledge to discuss and debate in class and in their papers. For graduate students, the themes are first forays into course design and pedagogical autonomy after the assistant teaching of discussion sections for large survey courses. We are encouraged, however, not to view these as literature courses, but strictly as writing courses: to develop themes, and titles for themes, that students from all over the college will want to sign up for. So, when I proposed a composition course entitled "Thoreau's *Walden*," reactions ranged from tepid to hostile: "students will never volunteer for such a course" or "first-years aren't ready for such difficult books." I was advised to teach instead "Consumerism and American Culture" or "Nature and American Culture."

Two years working as a tutor in UVA's writing center, however, had convinced me that my colleagues were selling students short, that some first-years wanted to be challenged by their courses—including composition—and that many needed a book like *Walden* that would confront the prevailing culture rather than a popular approach to works that reveled in it. I offered "Thoreau, *Walden*, and America" the next fall and spring, and had to manage wait lists for a course that many had predicted would be forced to grub for students.

The class was not, despite administrative fears, a covert literature course, but rather a slow meditation on and reaction to one difficult text and its cultural ramifications. Each Monday, we discussed a chapter or two in *Walden*, working slowly through the book over fourteen weeks. Each Wednesday and Friday, we discussed mostly recent articles (*not* literary criticism), stories, book excerpts, and films that advanced, challenged, or reinterpreted Thoreau's ideas. Reading *Walden* this way helped my students see why teachers care about these old books, how writers like Thoreau continue to speak to readers, and why their professors can't read or watch anything without being reminded of so much else. Not all of them left the course fans of Henry David. Some of my favorite students each semester found him hard to swallow and expressed as much, often eloquently. Most of my students did leave the course willing and able to engage productively in some way with a resonant but thorny cultural artifact. *Walden* and its progeny proved perfect catalysts for the kind of mental struggle one hopes for in a composition classroom, and the papers that resulted were, overall, a joy to read.

"The Writings of Henry David Thoreau (EH 491/591): Active Learning Strategies in the Upper-Division Literature Classroom," Linda Frost

In a course focusing on most of Thoreau's major prose works—*Walden, Maine Woods, Cape Cod, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*—each student was required to complete a final, creatively conceived project that had to: (1) exhibit a thorough, complete, and specific understanding of one or more of Thoreau's texts; and (2) be an agent of action in some way that was both in keeping with Thoreau's ideas and ideals and that benefited more than just the instructor. This presentation focused on the results of this assignment, results that included a literacy website, a statewide conservation survey, a course design that disseminated practical career advice for English majors, a theatrical adaptation of "The Pond in Winter," a short story told from the perspective of Kate Brady, and a full-scale art installation based on the "The Last Words of Henry David Thoreau." In short, this course and the projects the students undertook in it showed clearly how effectively students can respond to literature in unpredictable, intellectually three-dimensional ways when they are specifically asked to learn actively.

"A Digital Critical Edition of Thoreau's 'Civil Disobedience': Using Multimedia Materials to Explore a Classic Text," Mike Frederick and Susan E. Gallagher

Although "Civil Disobedience" has long been available on various sites on the Internet, Thoreau scholars have yet to take advantage of digital technologies to place the work directly within its historical context and study its impact on later conceptions of resistance to government in the United States and around the globe. To tackle this challenge, we are developing a digital critical edition of "Civil Disobedience" that will be published by the University of Massachusetts Press in late 2008 or early 2009. Like paper-based critical editions of classic texts, our edition of "Civil Disobedience" will include a comprehensive introduction, detailed annotations, and critical commentary designed to reach a broad audience. The volume will also be copyedited and subjected to pre-publication peer review following the usual procedures for conventional academic books. Unlike paper-based volumes, our edition will feature a wealth of documentary images, historical newspaper and journal articles, and, as appropriate, sound and video files.

Our goal in gathering these diverse resources is not simply to jazz up Thoreau for the digital age, but to provide specific insight into his contributions to American political thought. For example, by including selected articles from mid-nineteenth century newspapers and journals, we aim to shed light on how Thoreau's vision of radical individualism was received by his contemporaries. Meanwhile, by drawing from his later works, we plan to explore how his ideas about resistance to government changed in the course of his life. In addition, we are commissioning scholars to write two multimedia essays, one on rediscovery of Thoreau by civil rights and anti-war activists during the 1960s and another on the future of civil disobedience in the United States.

Our edition of "Civil Disobedience," which is part of an ongoing series of digital critical editions of works by New England authors that will be issued by the University of Massachusetts Press, will be designed for adoption in college and advanced high school courses in many areas of study, but we hope that our novel approach to Thoreau's essay will appeal to established scholars and first-time readers alike.

"Principle Over Preference; or, Why Thoreau Trumps Bartleby," Leslie Eckel

Thoreau in "Resistance to Civil Government" and Melville's fictional character "Bartleby, the Scrivener" both end up in

jail as a result of their refusals to conform to the standards of behavior set by society. I began a class discussion of these two texts in an American literature survey course by asking the following questions: what, if anything, distinguishes these two figures from one another, and whose form of resistance do you find most legitimate or effective? Bartleby initially appealed far more to my students than Thoreau did. Bartleby's disobedience in the workplace echoed their frustrations with their own term-time jobs and appealed to their lingering adolescent spirit of non-cooperation, as well. Thoreau, however, resists authority for a specific reason, while Bartleby does not. When challenged by his employer with the question, "You *will* not?" Bartleby responds, "I *prefer* not." Bartleby follows his preference, whereas Thoreau acts on principle, giving his resistance the force of individual will and moral certitude that Bartleby's lacks. Thoreau writes, "Action from principle—the perception and the performance of right,—changes things and relations; it is essentially evolutionary, and does not consist wholly with any thing which was." In explicit contrast to Thoreau, Bartleby states, "at present I would prefer not to make any change at all." His intentions are not revolutionary, so his words end up as "dead letters," inspiring no one.

As a follow-up assignment to this discussion, I asked students to ponder what principles or causes, if anything, mattered to them so much that they would be willing to spend a night (or more) in jail to uphold them. This writing exercise gave them a chance to converse with Thoreau as well as later figures—such as Gandhi and King—who built upon his principled foundation, and finally to realize that their own words could be living letters, capable of "changing things and relations" for good.

"Teaching Writing Through Thoreau," Rebecca Chamberlain

Reading Thoreau is like taking in a million thoughts in one breath.
Kristine Kaneshiro, SMU, English 101 (2007), midterm examination

At this point, Henry noticed a spider web in the grape vines and turned to contemplate it. I waited to resume conversation, but he proceeded to retreat to the shed and shut the door. I could see having Henry for a companion wasn't going to be an exactly peaceful alliance.
Taylor Pitman, TESC, Transcendental Visions (2005), personal essay

Thoreau's works and Transcendental philosophy are ideal for developing a variety of readings, workshops, and curriculum activities related to bioregional literacy and sustainability for use in composition and writing courses, as well as classes in literature, humanities, and environmental education. Thoreau's ideas prepare students to become critical writers and thinkers as they begin to live "deliberately" as productive citizens in a world where the "complex, universal issues—healthy communities and ecosystems, environmental justice, and sustainability" are paramount (Jean MacGregor, Curriculum for the Bioregion; http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/project/documents/2_pager_entire_small_5-02.pdf). Combined with contemporary writers and issues, Thoreau's works illuminate our time as well as his, and inspire students to develop their own writings and sense of identity as they put the concept of "the American dream" into perspective with issues of sustainability and the common good.

For a series of workshops, resources, and teaching approaches that can be adapted for a variety of existing writing courses, and for course materials that engage students with the issues facing their particular bioregion and concepts of sustainability, go to the Washington Center's "Curriculum for the Bioregion at The Evergreen State College" at http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/bioregion. For a copy of my workshops and articles that feature Thoreau and other writers, including "Writing and Walking, Pilgrimage and Process," go to http://academic.evergreen.edu/c/chambreb/.

Session 2: "Thoreau: Boundaries, Crossings, Passages"

"Thoreau in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*: France, September 1887," Veronica Kirk-Clausen

On September 15, 1887, the French literary critic Thérèse Bentzon published an article entitled "Le Naturalisme aux Etats-Unis" in the prominent French literary review the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. The first surprise of this article is in its title—which refers not to naturalism as it is traditionally understood within the genre of realism, but to another literary movement Bentzon wishes to associate with the same name: texts about nature, which she identifies as a development specific to the New World. Thoreau is the central figure in Bentzon's group of New World "naturalist" writers; she focuses her article on his work and then provides brief readings of three other writers—John Burroughs, James Lowell, and Sarah Orne Jewett—to demonstrate the scope of the group within which she situates Thoreau. Bentzon thus creates a place for Thoreau's texts that is distinct from both the Transcendentalist movement and the American Renaissance period that tend to contextualize Thoreau within American literary history. Locating Thoreau within a broad range of poets, novelists, and essayists concerned with the American natural world, Bentzon's article is a hybrid mixture of literary criticism of Thoreau's oeuvre, biographical details of his life, a summary of *Walden* and of *A Yankee in Canada*, and passages from *Walden* that she has translated into French.

The elements of literature, literary criticism, history, philosophy, and the politics of canon revision embedded within "Le Naturalisme aux Etats-Unis" suggest the palimpsestic layers of textuality and activism that are themselves embedded in translation studies. By examining this French critical article on Thoreau, which contains some of the first passages of Thoreau's work to be translated into French, this paper explores the early roots of a transatlantic, translated Thoreau.

"The Arc of the Scimitar and Rainbow in *Walden*: The Bhagavad Gītā's Unity of Science and Literature," John R. Davidson

Nineteenth-century German intellectuals were interested in Indian philosophy, and Humboldt may have been influenced by the six Indian philosophical systems (especially Sankhya, Vedanta, Nyaya, and Vaiśeshika) when developing what Laura Walls has called "empirical holism" in *Seeing New Worlds*. According to Robert Richardson in his Thoreau biography (subtitled *A Life of the Mind*), Thoreau began an intensive period of readings in the Laws of Menu, the Bhagavad Gītā, and the Sānkhya Karikas in the fall of 1849, and was reading the Visnu Purana at the same time as Humboldt's *Aspects of Nature* and *Kosmos* in the spring of 1850. The word "fact" is used in *Walden* to reinforce the importance of a particular intellectual discernment between the sun and its reflection in the water. Lacking significant familiarity with Indian philosophy, scholars of Thoreau's *Walden* tend to focus on explicit quotations rather than closely reading for more subtle allusions and themes. As a result, Thoreau's sophisticated engagement with the pantheism of Indian metaphysics and Vaishnava Vedanta in *Walden* has sometimes been overlooked or underestimated. The image of a geometric arc is repeated

throughout the text as a scimitar, the silver arc of a fish jumping on the surface of the pond, while Thoreau's ecstatic dolphin experience in a rainbow's arc marks an incommunicable fact. When Wilkins's 1785 translation of the Bhagavad Gītā is intertextualized with *Walden*, the arc is consistently a metaphor for the intellectual discernment between the real and reflected sun. God is reflected like the sun in the beauty of a colorful and variable creation as well as in the individual without being equated with Nature or the Self. The stillness and purity of the water indicate the Indian concept of pure matter or nature (prakriti) perfectly reflecting the spirit (purusa) and reconciling dualism. Krishna, the personal God and artistic Creator in the Bhagavad Gītā, is neither pantheist nor auto-theist but remains transcendent. The colorful activity of multiple creatures playing on the surface of the water in *Walden* expresses the artistic holiness of the Creator and creation according to the Bhagavad Gītā. Thoreau realized that recognizing the holiness of the multiplicity of colorful individuals among polymorphous species in creation could forge a new science that was neither idolatrous nor dominant over nature, but rather environmental and ecological.

Will the Native Clam Be Extinct?

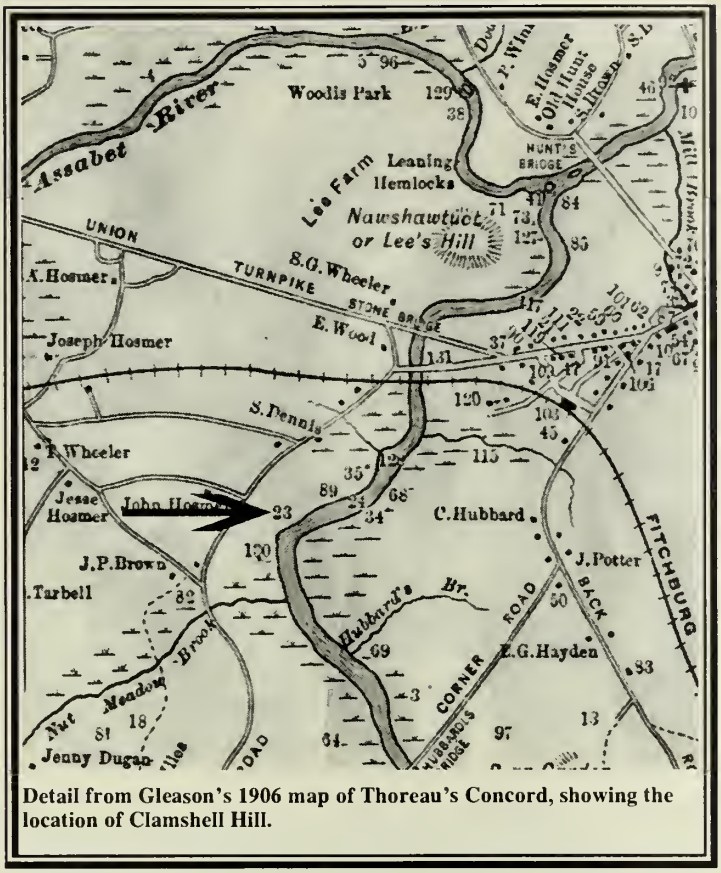
Kristina Joyce

On December 3, 1853, Henry David Thoreau wrote, "It is a somewhat saddening reflection that the beautiful colors of this shell for want of light cannot be said to exist, until its inhabitant has fallen a prey to the spoiler, and it is thus left a wreck upon the strand."[1] These philosophical words have always fascinated me because I love seashells.

I came to know that some shells can exist inland in freshwater ponds, streams, and rivers. Scientists refer to them as *Unionidae*, with *Elliptio*, *Anodonta*, *Margaritifera*, and *Lampsilis* as specific Concord varieties. Thoreau's words directed me to this discovery, and Harvard professors—members of the Boston Malacological Club[2]—told me that the best freshwater shell collectors are muskrats. So, by the Sudbury River, I found a muskrat's den and reread more of Thoreau's December 3, 1853, journal entry: "Probably the muskrat inserts his incisors between the edges of the shells (and so crumbles them) in order to pry them open . . . People would be surprised to learn what quantities of these shellfish are annually consumed by the muskrat."[3]

Yes, I did find some shells by the muskrat's den in the 1980s. Then I made another discovery, prompted by Thoreau's observation: "Some of these shells at Clamshell Hill, whose contents were cooked by the Indians, are still entire, but separated. Wood has spread a great many loads over his land."[4] I felt as though I had come to know a holy threesome: the clam, the muskrat, and man, all interconnected. The clam was food for the muskrat and man, and the empty shells provided lime for man's fields to make plants grow. Thoreau continued:

> Their shells help convert the meadow mud or river sediment into food for plants. The Indians generally—I have particularly observed it in the case of the Penobscots—make a very extensive use of the muskrat for food, and from these heaps it would seem that they used the fresh-water clams extensively also,—these two particularly indigenous animals.[5]



Detail from Gleason's 1906 map of Thoreau's Concord, showing the location of Clamshell Hill.

What was this Clamshell Hill that Thoreau mentioned in his journal? It was a mammoth Concord midden—a Native American refuse heap containing shells, bones, and other by-products of human habitation—situated on the Sudbury River, where Route 2 and the Emerson Hospital parking lot are currently located.

Archaeologist Benjamin L. Smith removed many shells from Clamshell Hill in the twentieth century. Some of these now form part of the Concord Museum's Native American holdings. They include specimens bearing the black traces of ancient Indian cooking fires. Thus, the remains of six-thousand-year-old Indian clambakes can be found in Concord today.

Hinting at the relationship of fish and clams, Thoreau wrote in his journal on May 4, 1858, about talking with "Witherell at William Wheeler's landing": "A fisherman told him once that the common eel 'gendered' into the river clam, and the young fed on the clam till they were big enough to get other food, and hence you found so many dead clams in the river."[6] Glochidia is the name for the infant clams brooded as fertilized eggs in the gills of the female clam, which releases them—up to three million per female—into the water as free swimming beings with pincers to attach to fishes' gills. The glochidia parasitize fish (the fish may be killed due to gill clogging or secondary infection from this process) until their tiny open shells develop (usually in ten to thirty days), and then drop to the river bottom to grow into full-sized, closed-shell clams. Since glochidia are microscopic, Thoreau probably didn't know about this phase of the clam's life cycle. He was correct that eels feed on clams. However, he did not record that eels consequently pick up glochidia in their gills.

On September 27, 1855, Thoreau remarked upon the movement of clams in cold weather: "See furrows made by many clams now moving into deep water."[7] So as not to freeze, the clams move to muddy depths of the river. On July 10, 1852, he

wrote about the clams moving to cooler water in summer: "The bottom is also scored with furrows made by the clams moving about—sometimes a rod long & always the clam lies at one end. So this fish can change its position & get into deeper & cooler water."[8] The clam navigates with an extension from its body called a foot. I have also learned in my shell club meetings that the clam is an important filter for our rivers. It feeds by taking minute nutrients from the water through a siphon tube. This filter feeding makes the creature a canary of the rivers, and thus its numbers have suffered from pollution directly. A saving grace is that people may no longer take clams for whatever reason, as *Unionidae* are on the Massachusetts endangered list.

Are the clams now commonly known as freshwater mussels extinct in our rivers today? Some varieties such as *Margaritifera* that were in Concord Rivers are not currently found there. Fish species have diminished due to habitat destruction, pollution, and the damming of streams, and therefore the freshwater clams have suffered as well.[9] Certainly, freshwater clams in general are greatly diminished from Thoreau's time. On August 15, 1853 (just one hundred and fifty-six years ago), Thoreau was able to write with a confidence we no longer sustain: "Bathed at Clam shell hill— There is [sic] perhaps 4 clams there under each foot— It will be long before the native clam will be extinct, like the Wellfleet oysters."[10]

Notes

[1] Henry David Thoreau, *Journal VI: December 1, 1853-August 31, 1854*, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 7.

[2] Malacology is the branch of zoology that deals with mollusks. The Boston Malacological Club will celebrate its one hundredth birthday in August 2010, at which time the Concord Free Public Library will display freshwater shells from Concord and artwork by Kristina Joyce, accompanied by Thoreau's observations and by Hosmer and Gleason photographs.

[3] Thoreau, *Journal VI*, 8.

[4] Thoreau, *Journal VI*, 8.

[5] Thoreau, *Journal VI*, 8.

[6] Thoreau, *Journal X: August 8, 1857-June 29, 1858*, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 399.

[7] Thoreau, *Journal VII: September 1, 1854-October 30, 1855*, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 463.

[8] Thoreau, *Journal. Volume 5: 1852-1853*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 210.

[9] John Hanson Mitchell, ed., "Between Land and Sea: The Fate of Migratory Fish," topical issue, *Sanctuary: The Journal of the Massachusetts Audubon Society* (Spring 2009).

[10] Thoreau, *Journal. Volume 6: 1853*, ed. William Rossi and Heather Kirk Thomas (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 304.

"Shells on the Beach"—photograph by Herbert Wendell Gleason, from the 1906 Manuscript Edition volume of Thoreau's *Cape Cod and Miscellanies*.

Notes & Queries

Thanks to those who have contributed to *TSB* 267. A clinical psychologist in northern California, **John M. Mahoney** has been deeply interested in the life and works of Henry Thoreau for the past fifteen years, and portrays Thoreau in the first person. Poet and essayist **June Beisch** teaches American literature at Emerson College in Boston and is the author of several books of poetry, including *Take Notes* (2000) and *Fatherless Woman* (2004). Raised in Oregon and currently living in Arlington, Massachusetts, **Tom Calderwood** is a graduate of MIT and an enthusiastic amateur astronomer. **Kristina Joyce** is an artist, a teacher of art and calligraphy, past president of the Boston Malacological Club, and a resident of Concord, Massachusetts, where she maintains a home studio for teaching art to young adults, in particular, and for housing collections of objects to inspire creativity.

Your editor is grateful to proofreaders **Dave Bonney**, **Ron Hoag**, **Bob Hudspeth** and **Monica Kelly** for their part in "quality control" over formatted copy for the *TSB*.

Bob Hudspeth has forwarded the URL for the online version of an article by Laura E. Huggins titled "On Earth Day, think Thoreau." Published in the Los Angeles *Times* for April 22, 2009, the piece is accessible at http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-huggins22-2009apr22,0,5432636.story. Bob also informs us of a piece by David Segal ("No, You can't get an Upgrade") in the "Week in Review" section of the New York *Times* for April 26, 2009. It deals with the impact of the recession on our embrace of upward mobility and includes Thoreau's observation, "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind." The URL for the Web version is http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/26/weekinreview/26segal.html?_r=1&emc=eta1.

Corinne Smith calls attention to the poem "Thoreau and the Toads," by David Wagoner, a reading of which is available on American Public Media's "The Writers Almanac" for April 7, 2009, at http://www.elabs7.com/ct.html?rtr=on&s=fj6,fhe3,dv,kcpc,7bg7,ej09,m2xm.

Kristina Joyce and—in the persona of Curator of the Concord Free Public Library Special Collections—**Leslie Wilson** are eager to inform Thoreau Society members of a joint project that will bear fruit beginning next July, in time for the 2010 TS Annual Gathering. They are planning a collaborative exhibition titled "All the Earth is Seashore" (the quotation is from Thoreau's journal entry for April 28, 1852), which will be on view in the CFPL art gallery throughout July, August, and September of 2010. The display will feature Kristina's artwork and calligraphy, art from the CFPL's permanent collection, freshwater shells from Concord, observations by Thoreau, and a selection from the CFPL's holdings of photographs by Alfred Winslow Hosmer and by Herbert Wendell Gleason. A lecture series and a published catalog will be offered in conjunction with the exhibition. Information will be posted on the CFPL website closer to the summer of 2010. For context about the theme of the display, see Kristina's article on Thoreau and shells, which begins on page 11 of this issue of the *Bulletin*.

There is additional Thoreau-related news from the CFPL. At Concord town meeting this April, local citizens approved funding through the Community Preservation Act for the second phase of a grant project to conserve the CFPL's major holdings of books once owned by Henry David Thoreau. For more information, see Constance Manoli-Skocay, "The CFPL's Thoreau Books Project,"

Thoreau Society Bulletin 265 (Winter 2009): 9-11. Also, Library Director Barbara Powell—who has been a friend to Thoreauvians since she began working at the CFPL in the late 1970s—will retire this summer. Her colleagues, the people of Concord, and many Thoreau Society members will miss her intelligent leadership and her humanism.

The article "Missing Indian Tombstone Recovered," which appeared in the Boston *Globe* for March 31, 2009, recently caught the eye of **Ed Schofield**. The tombstone in question is the grave marker of Thomas N. Smith, a Wampanoag Indian of Middleborough, Massachusetts. Thoreau met Smith and wrote about him in his journal entry for October 2, 1855. Ed reports that he is working on an article about Smith and his wife.

Sandy Petrulionis notices a cartoon in the May 4, 2009, issue of the *New Yorker* (page 33). She comments that it's "doubly funny for Thoreauvians" because the caption evokes both Thoreau and Don Henley.

A May 3, 2009, exchange on the Concord e-group (concord@yahoogroups.com) centered on the plethora of recent books about, inspired by, or otherwise relating to Thoreau. The dialogue was sparked by an e-group posting that referred to Jennifer Schuessler's "Thoreau's Pencil" (in the New York *Times* for May 1, 2009; electronically accessible at http://papercuts.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/05/01/thoreaus-pencil/). The titles that came up in the course of the discussion were David K. Leff's *Deep Travel: In Thoreau's Wake on the Concord and Merrimack*, Robert Sullivan's *The Thoreau You Don't Know*, John Pipkin's *Woodsburner* (a novel), and Elise Lemire's *Black Walden*. At this point, your editor is lining up reviewers to write about some of these books for future issues of the *TSB*, and also about Robert Thorson's *Beyond Walden: The Hidden History of America's Kettle Lakes and Ponds*. Additionally, I would be glad to hear from, and publish an article in the *Bulletin* by, anyone inclined to explore more broadly what lies behind this spate of new titles.

In the meantime, there is no lack of summer reading for those interested in Thoreau.

President's Column

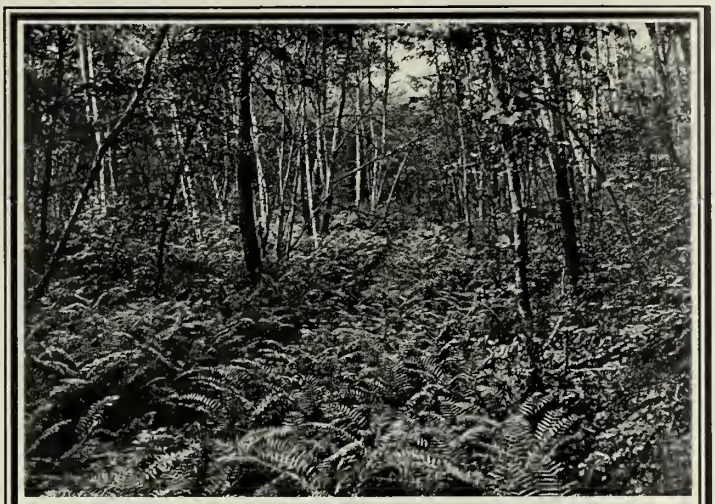
Pardon the nod to the business side of the Society, but I want to inform you about positive efforts that the Board and Executive Director have made toward reducing our budget deficit. In recent years, we have at times operated at an annual deficit of ninety thousand dollars. At this pace, the Society as presently structured was heading for a quick demise.

The Finance Committee of the Board and Executive Director Mike Frederick have worked continuously to guide us to safer fiscal ground. At each meeting of the Board, we have seen improvements in both cost-cutting efforts and increased financial support from the membership. I thank all parties involved in our combined approach to alleviating the situation.

Our office will soon move to Virginia Road in Concord, to the Thoreau birthplace, which is owned by the Thoreau Farm Trust. As tenants of the Trust and fellow inhabitants of this location, we will make additional gains in control over our financial destiny. By the latest estimate, the move will reduce our operating costs by approximately ten thousand dollars annually.

If you had a chance to attend this year's Annual Gathering in Concord, I hope that you took advantage of the opportunity to visit the Thoreau birthplace. It is both fitting and exciting to see Henry going back home, so to speak. I want to acknowledge the tireless efforts of Thoreau Farm Trust members in seeing this project to completion. I thank them for making it possible for the Thoreau Society to relocate to this historic property. We look forward to a long and healthy cooperation as both organizations present Thoreau to his world-wide following.

I recall my first visit to the birthplace, then still occupied as a residence. At that time, only a small number of Thoreauvians were aware of its significance. On a quiet, hot, humid summer afternoon, I stood there chilled by the realization of the uniqueness of this land and house. Little did I know then that someday our Society would reside there and work collaboratively to keep Thoreau's word and place alive for the rest of the world. I hope that some of you will be able to attend the opening of the facility in September. It will be quite an event.



"Ferns in Clintonia Swamp"—photograph by Herbert Wendell Gleason, from Volume 6 of the 1906 Manuscript Edition of Thoreau's *Journal*.

In the maple swamp at Hubbards Close the great cinnamon ferns are very handsome now in tufts falling over in handsome curves on every side—A rank undergrowth about 3 feet high completely hiding the dead leaves Some are a foot wide & raised up 6 feet long.

***Journal*, July 19, 1854**

Mary Wheeler sketch of the Thoreau birthplace, from a plate in the Thoreau Society's Kovar Collection copy of the two-volume edition of *Walden* published by Houghton, Mifflin in 1897.

"Harebells"—photograph by Herbert Wendell Gleason, from the 1906 Manuscript Edition volume of Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

Additions to the Thoreau Bibliography

Robert N. Hudspeth

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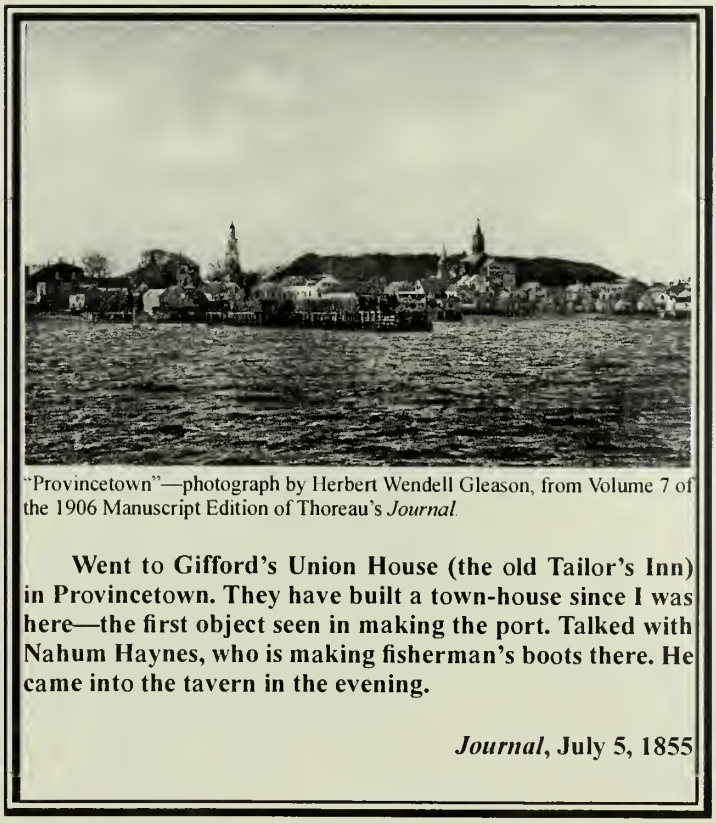

"Provincetown"—photograph by Herbert Wendell Gleason, from Volume 7 of the 1906 Manuscript Edition of Thoreau's *Journal.*

Went to Gifford's Union House (the old Tailor's Inn) in Provincetown. They have built a town-house since I was here—the first object seen in making the port. Talked with Nahum Haynes, who is making fisherman's boots there. He came into the tavern in the evening.

***Journal*, July 5, 1855**

We are indebted to Richard Winslow III for information used in this *Bulletin.* Please keep your editor informed of items not yet added and new items as they appear.

Notes from Concord

Michael J. Frederick, Executive Director

In 2001, the Thoreau Society was designated the official friends group for Walden Pond, supporting park programming and operations in cooperation with the Walden Pond State Reservation, which is managed by the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR).

Thoreau Society staff members coordinate Friends of Walden Pond activities with DCR efforts to develop and sponsor interpretive programs on Thoreau's life and works in connection with Walden the place, amidst the pine and oak forest that surrounds the pond.

One program that has become a tradition throughout the fall and winter months and into the early spring is the "Window on Walden" authors series. Local and regional writers are invited to discuss their latest works dealing with Thoreau, Walden Pond, and the environment.

This season, our featured speakers included: Deborah Weisgall, *Joyful Noise*; Dan Tobyne, *Thoreau's Cape Cod*; Anita Sanchez, *The Teeth of the Lion: The Story of the Beloved and Despised Dandelion*; Eric Pinder, *A Tale of Two Mountains*; Glenn Adelson, James Engell, and Kevin Van Anglen, *Environment: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*; and Megan Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism*.

The Friends of Walden Pond is a key outreach activity of the Thoreau Society and is supported by people living in the area, visitors to the pond, and Thoreau Society members. "Window on Walden" is free and open to the public and takes place on Saturday afternoons.

If you live in Massachusetts, please stay tuned for our fall offerings. Additionally, if you would like to present your own work in an upcoming series, please contact the Thoreau Society office at (978) 369-5310 to arrange an engagement.

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